

BOOK REVIEW: *Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas: Repression & Resistance in Chicana & Mexicana Literature* by Anna Marie Sandoval (2009)

Sandra K. Soto

Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas: Repression & Resistance in Chicana & Mexicana Literature. By Anna Marie Sandoval. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. 149 pages. \$50.00 (cloth). \$25.00 (paper).

Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas: Repression & Resistance in Chicana & Mexicana Literature is lovingly undergirded by Anna Marie Sandoval's profound belief in the power of Chicana feminist literature to improve peoples' lives. Throughout this work, her dedication to and admiration of Chicana feminist literature is moving and inspiring. Speaking about her first encounters with the works of Chicana feminists, Sandoval writes about how they, "Spoke to my cultural experience as a woman and as a Chicana from a working-class background. That passion for literature is what led me to the world of academia, and that passion is what keeps me here" (91). Like so many first-generation Chicana college students who struggle to find their way through an alienating environment, Sandoval's discovery of Chicana feminism and Chicana studies classes was absolutely life changing. Her identification with Chicana feminist literature permeates every page of the book such that her revelation in the closing pages does not come as a surprise—when she first came upon Chicana literature as an undergraduate she "wanted to be like a preacher, spreading the word of Chicana writers" (91). Having launched a career dedicated to exactly that, Sandoval's book critically engages and personally celebrates several key Chicana and Mexicana authors.

Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas consists of four chapters framed by a brief preface and afterword, both of which are autobiographical. The first-person preface passionately links storytelling to personal empowerment. Working from her sense of calling, Sandoval writes: "I, like Helena María Viramontes, wish to give voice to the women who, for whatever reasons, cannot tell their stories" (ix). This emphasis on telling/writing one's own story recurs throughout the book, but especially so in chapter two, "Crossing Borders and Blurring Boundaries: Sandra Cisneros Re-visions the Wailing Woman," which takes up both *The House on Mango Street* and the short story "Woman Hollering Creek." Sandoval is especially drawn to *Mango Street's* main character Esperanza, whose realization that she *must* become a writer is so akin to Sandoval's own convictions: She writes that Esperanza "makes her experience the collective experience of Chicanas and other women who have not been given the privilege of writing their story" (31). Likewise, in discussing "Woman Hollering Creek," Sandoval pauses over what it means that of all objects Juan Pedro could have hurled at his wife Cleófilas during a fight, he chooses one of her *books* (38). For Cleófilas, as well as for Sandoval, a book carries much significance because it is related to storytelling and therefore highly symbolic of personal empowerment. When Juan Pedro literally harms Cleófilas with her means to empowerment, the irony is too much to bear and she finally leaves him.

Carmen Boullosa's *La Salvaja* and Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* are discussed in the third chapter, "'No Dejen Que Se Escapen': Carmen Boullosa and Laura Esquivel." The final chapter, "Acts of Daily Resistance in Urban and Rural Settings: The Fiction of Helena María Viramontes," focuses on the short story "The Cariboo Cafe" and the novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Of all of the readings, the discussion of "The Cariboo Cafe" is transnational in the sense that Sandoval necessarily discusses the story's

movement between Central America and Los Angeles as well as the characters' experiences with displacement, disappearance, and ("illegal") immigration. The introductory chapter, "'Unir los Lazos': Braiding Chicana and Mexicana Subjectivities," situates the book as a "comparative analysis of Mexicana and Chicana subjectivities [which] examines oppositional discourses" (1). Sandoval explains that she is particularly interested in how Chicanas and Mexicanas are both invested in "reformulating cultural symbols and offering nontraditional constructions of culturally relevant themes" (2). Sandoval must be commended for launching this kind of project before transnational studies were fashionable. However, the term comparative puts the onus predominantly on the reader. While Sandoval's book includes discussions of two Chicana authors and two Mexicana authors—those discussions are more or less discrete in the sense that the authors are not brought into any substantive engagement with each other. We do not learn what is to be gained by reading these four authors under the same cover, and ultimately, the book falls short of its title.

Sandoval's technique is to let the authors' fiction take center stage and as such, the writing is largely descriptive in nature. This makes the writing accessible, which is one of the book's greatest strengths and certainly reflects Sandoval's commitment to empowerment and to her belief that "theory is the lived experience" (90). A reader who is unfamiliar with Cisneros, Bouldosa, Esquivel, and Viramontes will be introduced to a very rich body of literature and, after reading Sandoval's accounts, will likely want to read these works firsthand. While this book may not be appropriate for graduate seminars or for people familiar with these authors, it is an excellent resource for those teaching lower division undergraduate courses in literature, women's studies, or Latina/o studies.